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Equations: New Visions

Adam Fieled

Portrait by Mary Evelyn Harju
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#12

Indeed, some equations are about nothing but pain: consummate, unceasing, unyielding pain. With Heather, the extreme fluidity of our intercourse lubricated into being a mixed set of thoughts and emotions. Ecstasy and agony remained in exact, if delicate, balance. From the moment I met Roberta, while still a young boy, her presence engendered in me a sense of extreme attraction and craving, soured by a sense of her as obstinate, obdurate, and generally a hard case. Roberta as a girl had olive skin, not unlike N; lank tawny hair which fell over her eyes and which she used to preen; a sleek, straightforwardly pretty face, which emphasized prominent cheekbones and (slightly) buck teeth. The story of the emergence of her clique in my class, as of fifth grade at Elkins Park Middle School, and my brief immersion in it, is not worth telling. The story of a dynamic tinged towards Pip-Estella, her used by forces above her to torment me, is worth telling. I was in the clique briefly, then out. What caused both of us the most pain, is a simple reality which animated everything which happened between Roberta and I: she wanted me as much as I wanted her, and we both knew it. We were condemned to be in love at the most star-crossed possible angle, and for many years, until the end of high school. Me in the clique, then half-in, then not in at all didn't matter: a force behind her, built into Cheltenham, the school district and the community, compelled her to play Estella for as long as she knew me. Roberta coped by halving things: she was only sort-of Estella, sort of a would-be lover, sort of with Cheltenham, sort of against. Her own equation was to take whatever emotional response she had to me and tramp it into the ground, just to survive, just to eat. We were playing tennis once, and she broke from her protocol (and disrupted the game) just to tell me a parable of sorts. There was this guy she was mad about, but she knew it just couldn't work out. And she'd done everything she could to try and jockey for a different position in her community, and failed. I was still a child, with a child's level of awareness, but even then I knew she sounded suspiciously like she was talking about me. Cheltenham had thrown her a bone: she had one chance to communicate to me, however obliquely, how she felt in my direction. The parable half-worked. I was never really able to achieve certainty, for myself, however, that it was about me. And for seven years, the half-assed romance stumbled forward. Communities destroyed individuals, as usual. Senior year, the sadness of her half-assed inscription in my yearbook leaned on N, who was more fulsome, for redemption; and both leaned me forward, into my days, to reach the apogee I achieved with Trish.

#17

The ecstasy levels built into my time with Kathy were dead-ended, also, by being too unreliable, too jumpy. It's just that at first Kathy & I didn't notice. I was let loose of the bondage with and to Cheltenham High School; Kathy had been more or less happy at North Penn. Yet, here we were in State College, ready to do what was incumbent upon us to do. Kathy, a stout blonde who alternated between jubilation and self-abnegating catatonia, had met me on the North Halls basketball courts one night while a party rocked the place. We improvised a routine and a place: down into the piano room in the Runkle basement. We took each other's virginity eagerly, avidly, without really noticing, and the meat of the matter was just adventure, passing the time, more adventure. I dealt with Kathy's self-abusive moods by playing therapist, to the extent that I could, and the semester swung around us. My roommate gone, we pushed the two beds in my dorm room together to continue our investigations. The sex itself was clumsy, yet strangely clean of transgression; like a couple of kids using a see-saw or on a calliope. There was a place we couldn't go about depth and a bridge we couldn't cross into the richer straits of passion. She bit my neck and left a purple bruise. The girls in my classes laughed at me, but I was a taken in young man. It's just that Kathy was somewhere else. Her real life remained in Lansdale, and she knew it. And with her camera, which she used with great acumen. I was at least noteworthy, other than for having taken her virginity (and she mine), for being a good photo subject, with my wild hair, baby face, and ragamuffin habits. We were preoccupied away from each other, and the feeling I later had with Jena, that *presence*, was missing. All of which was present in us as we distractedly banged away at each other.

#20

But what the Devil does falls down around the heels when withholding is the only option. Ginny teaches me this, despite the great difference in our ages (my thirty-three to her twenty-two). When we try to escape, its' to a place of no consummations; when we go up, it's like a tarantula's leg that points back down again. Ginny must withhold because she belongs, in every sense, to her family. The luscious red hair, bulging green eyes, extreme voluptuousness of her appearance belie her raison d'etre: to bind and fasten. As she binds and fastens, there's more looseness than she realizes: you have to give in *sometimes* to get the goods. The truth emerges, after several months of "almost there": Ginny is a virgin. Ginny withholds because her parts have defects. Because she is sickly, her gorgeousness is one of the universe's cruel jokes. The joke is on her and her would-be lovers, and, like most of the best jokes, it isn't that funny. Ginny is one of those strange girls that seems to have no interests in life; that thinks that her body is her only mind; and that her body that is her mind must be so much an issue of blood that to blood it must return. To be a tart is simply recreation; but there is no sense of seriousness or duty behind it. Yet Ginny stands on the mountain of her own pulchritude, and surveys the carnage at the bottom with calculated niceness. She has never known submissiveness, even as part of a strategic plan, and never will; so she perpetually awakens to see she's done no real damage. Her mountain is a reverse mountain, which runs from the soil into hell. At a key moment, in the middle of a summer at the end of the Aughts, with Trish unhappily in Manhattan, Tobi fading, the Free School a memory, Ginny and her friends take the Drop hostage. I earn the right and privilege to be in Ginny's apartment (on Pine Street, down the street east from the Drop) several times, which resembles Julie's, high ceilings, wooden floors. Ginny sits next to me on her sofa and watches children's movies on her laptop. I try nothing. She wields an axe, and her physiology is resolutely shut-down, compacted. The Drop waves the white flag, and, as I knew even then, an era was ending. Everything about her group signaled that we'd all been having too much fun, and that the Center City-wide party was over. Actual sex was passe, beside the point. Besides, it was noticeable that when I walked around Center City that summer with Ginny, which I did, everyone looked at us as though we were a couple. Only I knew what was being withheld. The image crafted made me look studly. To her, that was more than enough. Funny: she wouldn't do bars. She just did her translation of bar-life into coffee shops, Temple classrooms, occasional drama productions. She was, herself, her own production— when she wore low-cut tops, or dresses, she was showing everyone who she was, and her breasts were a bared switchblade. That equation: sex used as an over or undertone to or for violence, or just the threat of violence: was big for her. Her tits were a weapon which could extort from the world what she wanted. All our idealism was replaced with back to the grind cynicism. Ginny's favorite dress for special occasions was black, and bared the fangs of her cleavage the right way.

#26

When I converse with N on the phone, in about my thirteenth year, our heads open up together, and we create an imaginative landscape out of nothing at all. Events around us, our classmates, notorious or boring or uproarious events of the days get used as fodder, parties, dances, and we hoist the whole rig up and sail it into the sky. We dance ourselves around our desire for each other: are we friends, or could we be more? When we broadcast together, other will sit and listen, spellbound. But to the left and to the right, even at thirteen, is the impulse to share our bodies as well as our souls and brains. N is conservative this way. She maintains a deep need to keep physicality light in and around her— she doesn't play sports, can't swim, is an excellent dancer but not a dab hand as a walker of city blocks, either. All her thoughts are of transcendentalizing past her own body, which is arrayed around her like marsh to wade through. The problem is a hold she wants to maintain over my emotions. We act, often, like newlyweds, but because she will not submit to me physically in any way, my emotions, unconsciously set at a skeptical angle, cannot cleave to her finally, like a ship docking in at a port. Sexual devotion often starts, I learn later, with the body, the physical mechanism. Our bodies are the primordial fact of who, and what we are. So, we talk on the phone for hours, imaginative leap follows imaginative leap, but imaginative leaps are not a basis for a man's devotion. Not that I'm aware of this at thirteen. All I know is that our brains are doing something intense together, and I like the feeling, but my soul craves a reality somewhere between us that cuts deeper, from sharper, starker angles, into a sense of achievement, conquest, victory, a permanent sense of marking and being marked. Later, it is Trish who brings all these algorithms together. She knows only too well what I am, and what I want. We imaginatively leap all over the cosmos together, hand in hand or separately, but the climax, the final imposition of the most profound shared imagination into the most profound imaginative leap, is back into our bodies and, when we are good together, out again, out into a re-entry of the cosmos, as a finality.

#27

Audrey, as a tangent to N, took the idea, not of broadcasting gossip but of sharing and disseminating literature, as a fait accompli move to establish romance, drama, suspense, and rich entanglement in her life. Prisoner of a rich background, and with a preacher for a father, she latched onto me as a purveyor of sweets for her, from my books to my looks to a sense of deference she wanted me to sometimes have as a way of demonstrating respect for her roots. The one determinative moment— we stood, with a crowd of poets, outside a bar in Andersonville, Chicago, as a night of festivities ended, and I was either going to pick her up somehow or not— ended in, for me, a practical response of denial. Her apartment was in an obscure neighborhood in Chicago, I was staying in the distant 'burb Palatine, and was due in Rockford the next afternoon. For Audrey, as she was later candid about, I was resisting something compelling in the universe which required that we spend the night together. She was heartbroken, with her Indiana-bred sense of being cornfed (blonde, voluptuous, clear complexion), and with the conviction she had that anything she wanted could always be hers. Rich equations suffer greatly from senses of entitlement, emanating from the rich, and dousing all that they touch with a glaze of non-recognition, of obliviousness. This was Audrey's contradiction— give her a text, available to be read at her leisure, incapable of vocalizing need or difference of any kind, and she could rise to the occasion brilliantly. Texts had a way of ejaculating into her brain and heart tissue, in a lovemaking routine (with the right text at the right time) extremely pleasurable for her. As I stood with her outside Moody's Pub, a flesh and blood entity— needy, morose, possibly surprising or disobedient the wrong way— turned her interest tempered with diffidence. This decided the night for us. Had we been ensconced together for several days, as I had been with Wendy, things might have been different. But when two possible lovers are too transient to each other, the magic spells don't work, incantations fall flat, and it is learned again that for equations to take on flesh in the world, there is no substitute for real, raw time.

#31

Yet quirks and idiosyncrasies facilitate fluidities— we all like what we like, just as we want what we want. For whatever reason, when I break up with Trish for the first time I fall in love with Sara, who I meet at the Last Drop. Sara is just graduating from the University of the Arts, with a journalism degree. She has bright blue eyes, a thick neck, a long, turned-up nose, and a massive bust, and for some reason (she resembles Cara in State College) it works for me. Moreover, she's a would-be occultist who likes what I'm writing for the paper we both write for. The first major break with Trish leaves me confused, restless, and also, given the Center City scene at the time, expectant. Everywhere I went, I found more interesting people. I became sensitized to Sara fast. This sense of being sensitized was not, it appeared to me, reciprocated. It was a simple, and essential, equation: I wanted her more than she wanted me, if she wanted me at all. I felt something where she did not. I knew this by instinct, and tried not to know. Yet, I was allowed, and given her super-hipster status (she's in with all the right bands and DJs), it was a privilege, to get to know her, quirks and all. Sara liked to leave things up in the air; her equation with sex was oriented around speech. That is, Sara liked to talk about sex more than she liked to have it. She loved the intrigue of conversation, rather than flesh meeting flesh; the sparkle of a public tete a tete, rather than actual skin scintillations. I discovered this over a period of months, as I was baffled by Sara's behaviors. She moved me compulsively; I always wanted more of her. The final equation she left me with is this: the wanting is sweeter (and sexier) than the having. But there's something I noticed amiss in this: Sara's equations were frightened. They presupposed a minimum of experience, and a maximum of insecurity on every conceivable level. My failure to physically penetrate Sara devastated me as much as the collapse of my established relationship with Trish. With Sara began a life spent in bars. I learned the right way to tip, to stare, to make successful moves over drinks; all those street level skills were a mountain to climb and a primer to master.

#37

Bars work into sex equations; so does travel. When Wendy and I hook up in New England, we manifest not only guts and bravado, but glamor. We are transients there, doing what transients do. What I make with Kyra, who shares a large flat in the East Village with one of her also-fashionista friends, is even more gruesomely constructed. Kyra is John's sister. John and I are running the Philly Free School together. When we stop off to spend the day with Kyra in Manhattan, and then the night, I know instantly that (as is gruesome to admit I could be this crass) I can make a score here. Kyra is drastically, dramatically about charm, glamor, and intrigue. The raven-haired, buxom look she favors is pure Liz Taylor, skin slightly bronzed more than Liz, and, most importantly, a physiology which does not say (as most physiologies do) no instantly. All her postures, jests, glances suggest there is room in her. Yet with John to think of (this is his sister), the transient sucker punch into bed would depend on me being (as Wendy had been to her benefactors in New Hampshire) more brutish than usual. Decentered away from our personal norm, against a novel backdrop, in the middle of a period of expansion and growth, why shouldn't I be brutish? Now's the time. At a bar not far from her flat, John and I hold court. Here is Samantha, a friend of mine from the old Manhattan days. We flirt outrageously, too. I've got a girl on either side of me on an elegant sofa (Manhattan, more than Philly, favors sofas in bars). John is bemused. Punch-drunk on all the attention, I understand that Samantha lives too far away, in the recesses of Brooklyn. Tonight it must be Kyra, or no one. John is also high as a kite and more tolerant than most. When the three of us tumble drunkenly back into Kyra's apartment, the crunch comes. I'm either going to make a play to sequester myself in Kyra's room with Kyra or be more civil with John, and less pushy generally. Fortunately or unfortunately (and channeling, perhaps, Baudelaire's Good Devil), I feel the game within me, and have just the right concoction running through my veins to see it through to the end. A bar is a game; travel is a game, often, too; and when game-stakes are raised, you either rise to the occasion or you don't. The door is eventually shut on John, who can't not laugh (welcome to P.F.S., right?), and I am alone with Kyra. The night is hot, her room not air conditioned. We don't talk much. I find myself riding the game, pushing the river, and what happens is not masterful or revelatory, but adequate. The fashionista appurtenance items (mostly clothes to be debuted, turned in to authorities, or discarded), sounds of the East Village beneath us, even Marlboro Reds to smoke (not my usual brand), all coalesce into a sense that having started on one square on a game board (that's bar-talk), I've done a game version of a check-mate. I've been a Zen arrow into space the right way. Even as I am not unaware that deeper questions and resonances are being unanswered, and John has real reason to be annoyed. For the night, I am Kyra's appurtenance item and she mine. This inverts who I am with Trish and Jena, but once the action's over and Kyra's asleep, there's no way out. The equation is: you did it, and that's it.

#39

That first spring I spent in State College, Hope swept hopelessly away from my friends and I as a siren. With her pitch black hair, dark eye make-up, Cure shirts, she embodied the mystery of the Gothic, which was a countercultural subtext in the Nineties about outsider-ism, what it meant to subsist as a freak in the world. I didn't know what she would be like up close— as of August, and the fall semester starting, the dimensional angle hit me as hard as Hope did, who was not taking no for an answer, with any of us. The attitude, once you gained access to her room, was as pure Don Juana as it could be. When she, frankly, pulled off her panties and offered me her crotch, the heat of it made me swoon, so that I could only half-function. She was too bold, too blunt. All of her was fiercely dark, and the fade into her was to cleave to the darkness. Yet, the tactile thing, about lovemaking and sex and the right kinds of delicacy and the right blend or savior faire towards mixing seductiveness, aggression, and restraint, was beyond her. Hope wanted sex to manifest as a Gothic ideal, a stand taken for burrowing into each other's permanent, corrosive darkness. What two bodies are actually supposed to do to make sex a something pleasurable, was not a relevant reality, when all that black eyeliner spoke more. All of which meant that sex here fell down, past her sharp jaw-line, bulging eyes, and exotically wrought face, into a way of demonstrating rebellion, obstinacy against the normative, but also awkwardness between two bodies hardening and softening in and out of harmony with each other, with their own nudity, and with an attitude too militant, too fierce. I learned that, movies and other cultural talisman objects aside, real sex requires real tenderness, for men as well as women, and when tenderness goes missing, so, generally, does ecstasy.

#45

Growing up with Emma, who had been in my class at CHS, wasn't like growing up with Roberta. It wasn't like anything. Emma, a lanky blonde with long, lank blonde hair, a chiseled, cat-like face, and long limbs, looked like a stunt double for Trish, and had been merely an acquaintance. She was quiet, and kept to herself. Her friends were among the geeks of the class. Why and how Emma knew to show up now, in the midst of all this turbulence with Trish, I have no idea, but she did. I laughed because she so resembled Trish, but I was also aroused. I liked the idea, past N and Roberta, of a real hook-up within my class, even ten years after the fact. She was there, at the Last Drop, on a succession of key summer days, in a sleeveless white blouse. After all these years, her cat-face grew on me as enchanting, compelling, suggestive of something her whole presence insinuated— she identified heavily with Trish, and had a female impulse to demarcate turf which could also be hers. Whether she'd been stalking us or just heard what was happening with us from the suburbs, I still don't know. I knew she was commuting to Center City from somewhere. What she wanted was just one night with me, I later concluded. When, on the one late afternoon I made my way with her back to Logan Square, we were ensconced, she took out a bottle of Robitussin as though it were an aperitif, and she were Trixie Belle. She wanted, as she said, a Robo-trip. It was part of the magic of that night that Emma wound up encapsulating for me so many different partners at once, including partners merely being anticipated. I found it easy to begin making love to her, because she made it easy. Her equation was interesting, about female levels of awareness— everything about her physiology screamed, you always wanted me the most, but you just didn't know it. You're a man— you don't know these things. I have delivered myself to you because you need me now, and I need you. Now you may begin to learn who you are. And we made love with great fluidity and rapidity, and then we made love again. Her fluidity was like Heather's would be, and the sense of being lulled into a trance of perpetual, high-intensity intercourse, on the bed, then on the living room floor, on the couch in the living room, from the front, from the back, was like Jena. We each gave the other a show-stopping performance, manifesting (as was odd, and as I was not too dumb and callow to notice) an inversion of our years of starving for each other. The absolute ecstasy of several mutual orgasms was the tactile insignia, as it might've been with Roberta and N, of an eternity of denial overcome. This, even as what was built into us both had been noticed only by her. Why, in sex equations, women usually hold the cards: women are receptive to sensory data on a deeper level than men, and have a primordial understanding of physiology, of bodies and more bodies, which men do not. When bodies speak, women listen more. Emma and I shared a home, but only she registered what our bodies shared, what was in them. When Trish showed up, it was a red flag from nature that it would be Emma's time to show up too. Even if it proved to be the cosmic design that after one night, I would never see Emma again.

Acknowledgements

Argotist Online Poetry— #26, #27

As/Is poetry blog— #45, #39

Otoliths— #37

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